
POLITICS, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIOLOGY AT PEMBROKE COLLEGE

Congratulations, little fresher & welcome to the best college in Cambridge~! :D You've chosen an excellent course & will definitely, even if you attempt to resist, enjoy your next three years as a member of the PPS faculty – formerly known as SPS (Social & Political Sciences), occasionally called PPSIS (Politics, Psychology, Sociology & International Studies) & eventually to be renamed HSPS (Human, Social & Political Sciences). O: These changes were/are mainly cosmetic ones that streamline administrative procedures, but the fact remains that this course has been evolving over the past few years & as such it is imperative that you read carefully the information given to you by the faculty. There is a handy course website at <http://www.ppsis.cam.ac.uk/>, which hopefully won't be changed along with the acronym.



Before I ramble on like Led Zeppelin, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Melissa Yoong, a second-year PPSer from Singapore. I took papers in Politics, Psychology, International Relations & Sustainable Development during my first year & will be specialising in Politics this year. As your subject rep, I'm more than happy to help you with any PPS-related needs so do feel emboldened to contact me if you have any

HOW PPS WORKS

As you probably read in the prospectus when you applied & any information sent by the faculty once you were accepted, in first year (PPS Part I) you choose 4 out of x number of papers. Last year there were 15 or so to choose from; this year there are 11. (No more Human Geography papers, awww.) At least 2 of these 4 must come from the big 3 – Politics, Psychology & Sociology.

During the first week of Michaelmas term, you can & probably should attend several different lectures & introductory supervisions before you decide which papers to take. Choosing is difficult because everything will seem so nice & shiny & interesting when you first enter these hallowed halls of learning, but rest assured that anything you choose will be taught well. (:

SOME USEFUL ADVICE

#1. HAVE NO FEAR.

Really. It's normal to come in assuming everyone else is smarter & better prepared than you, but before long you'll discover that everybody in Cambridge is ultimately mortal. (Except the fellows. & the porters. & Savino, but that's a story for another day.) Not to mention you probably suck less than you think you do. Singapore doesn't offer Politics or Psychology A Levels, & I'd never done any History, which unfortunately would have been extremely useful in IR & Politics. But I worked hard, & eventually overcame that initial disadvantage. Which brings me to

#2. WORK HARD.

Many people will tell you that PPS is a “doss” subject & scoff at you when you claim to have work to do. This is untrue. (Come on, this is Cambridge, after all) More often than not you will be running between the college or faculty library & your room with a heap of books in your arms that resembles a mid-sized mountain range. You will have about 1.5 2000 – 3000-word essays to do every week (this of course is subject to change, I once hit a monstrous 5000 for IR & trust me, it’s nothing to be proud of – supervisors don’t want to pore over biblical tomes), & for each essay you should choose as many readings as you need to understand the subject matter thoroughly & from a few different perspectives. Papers like Sociology & Politics have set texts that you really ought to familiarise yourself with, but always keep in mind that forming an opinion on what a thinker said is infinitely more important than knowing it.

#3. DO YOUR WORK.

This seems like I’m repeating #2, & also seems like it goes without saying. But sometimes you’re absolutely swamped with things to do, or all your rehearsals & society meetings & talks seem to be taking place during the same brief time frame, & it becomes extremely tempting to leave an essay unwritten. You should be aware by now that the allure of Oxbridge lies in their unique supervision system, which means that you will be facing academic bigwigs in groups of 2 or 3, if not on your own. At the very least, do some reading & show up with an essay plan so you have something to discuss. As I’m sure your supervisors will tell you themselves – supervisions are for you, not for anyone else.

#4. ATTEND LECTURES.

This may come as a surprise, but lectures are actually useful things. O: After all, your professor *is* going to be coming up with your exam paper eventually. As a Valencian you’ve really lucked out – lectures for Psychology, Politics & International Relations are a stone’s throw away, so you can wake up <5 minutes before your lecture, cram a cereal bar in your mouth & still be on time, albeit in your jammies. Most social sciences, e.g. Sociology are taught at the Sidgwick Site, which is substantially further away but not so far that you’d have reason to whine about it. As a PPSer, you don’t have as many lectures as say, those wretched NatScis to begin with, & the number will be further reduced in Lent Term. In Easter there are only revision lectures & supervisions. Most of this “spare” time will have to be devoted to hacking through readings... but you’re an Arts student, so you’ll be good at reading.

#5. GET TO KNOW BARBARA.

Dr Barbara Bodenhorn is your Director of Studies. She lectures & supervises Social Anthropology, & she is probably an Earth Goddess. If you don’t take Social Anthropology, you will have compulsory meetings with her twice a term, but don’t be afraid to approach her during the rest of the term to discuss anything from particular topics & works to essay writing skills & time management. She will always be there to guide & support you, especially during the particularly daunting first year. (: (She also organises these incredible lunches with the Master – none other than THE Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6 & all that. The free food is good, the smug feeling of being a privileged PPSer even better, & of course the political discussion incredible. You did good picking PPS in Pembroke!)

#6. ENJOY YOURSELF.

You chose PPS presumably because you like it & are good at it. Never forget that. Even when certain topics seem terribly dull, or when you're suffering from a horrible case of essay writer's block – try to see how what you're learning fits into the larger scheme of things. Eventually you will begin to enjoy & feel proud of late nights in the library in a vaguely masochistic way. It's hard but strangely invigorating work & you *will* marvel at how much you've learned & remembered when exams finally come around. You don't need to take Psychology to realise that the human mind IS A REMARKABLE THING~

PRE-TERM PREPARATION

You really don't have to worry about pre-term preparation, especially since you can't really get cracking till you've decided which papers to take. Perhaps you should print the paper guides off the website as soon as you can so you can start thinking about which options you'd prefer. If there are certain papers that you're absolutely certain that you want to study, you might then want to start reading the first few recommended texts, e.g. *Leviathan* if you're dead set on Politics. Questions not unlike those you will be given in supervisions to direct your critical reading of the texts will also be in these paper guides.

You don't need to buy any books unless you're a hoarder. Both the college & faculty libraries are extremely well-stocked & have several copies of the primary texts so you won't need to race there after lectures to beat your peers to your precious. If all the books you need have been taken out or are for library use only, your supervisors will probably have copies of their own that they'll be willing to lend you... if they can find them. The adorable IR supervisor we had last year (sadly he's on some kind of research sabbatical this year) has a mind-boggling library of his own, but the books are strewn everywhere & you'd be hard-pressed to find the one you wanted.

Some last words of advice that come way in advance (though you'll probably have discarded or misplaced this letter by Easter 2012, if Armageddon hasn't already arrived) – do look up past year tripos papers & the accompanying examiners' reports so you can practise answering different kinds of questions & avoid the usual pitfalls students face.

I know all of this must look really intimidating, but keep in mind that this letter from me is only about the academic aspect of your time in Cambridge, & university is also about extra-curricular activities & having a social life! :D See you all in Michaelmas & please feel very free to contact me if you want to know more.

Yours, Melissa
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